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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000747

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: BOUCHER PRESSES DEFENSE SECRETARY ON
HUMANITARIAN ACCESS AND CHILD SOLDIERS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT O. BLAKE, JR. REASONS: 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher and Ambassador Blake met Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa on August 1 to discuss bilateral security cooperation, the progress of the government's war against the separatist Tamil Tigers, and humanitarian and human rights problems that have resulted from the conflict. Rajapaksa appeared confident of victory and made it clear that the government would not interrupt its current military offensive against the Tigers in the north. He was characteristically unwilling to accept any criticism of the government's conduct of its struggle against the Tamil Tigers. He said the government will seek the release of child soldiers serving with armed paramilitaries once the United Nations Children's Fund provides information on their whereabouts. He underscored government support for eastern Tamil paramilitary and political movement (TMVP) leader Pillaiyan, saying that previous governments had erred in not working with his movement. End summary.

Military Progress against the Tamil Tigers

12. (C) Assistant Secretary Boucher, Senior Advisor Caitlin Hayden, Ambassador Blake and Embassy Defense Attache met Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa on August 1 to discuss security cooperation, the progress of the government's war against the Tigers, efforts to stabilize the East, and the need to obtain the release of remaining child soldiers. Rajapaksa assessed that the previous military leadership had erred by overestimating the strength of the Tamil Tigers and did not properly prepare the army to fight them. Army Commander Fonseka, unlike his predecessors, he opined, understands problems at the tactical level and tactical requirements because of his years of combat experience fighting the Tigers. Rajapaksa told Boucher that the remaining Tiger cadres and leaders were not impressive. Talking to "Colonel Karuna," a former senior Tamil Tiger leader who defected to the government side in 2004, had made him realize the inadequacy of the current leadership of the Tigers. Rajapaksa assessed that the LTTE's development as a conventional force had undermined its effectiveness as a

guerilla force. Still, the Tigers were able to identify Sri Lankan military weaknesses very well. He also remarked that the Tigers continue to enjoy strong financial support from Tamils overseas, along with proactive well-organized public relations that exceeds the government's.

No Return to Negotiations

13. (C) Despite the Tigers' offer of a ceasefire during the SAARC meetings, Rajapaksa said he saw no signs that the Tigers truly want to negotiate. The Tigers were not sincere during past attempts at a peace process, he said, adding, "the Sri Lankan people are fed up and will not accept it." The Defense Secretary made it clear that the government of Sri Lanka will not halt the current offensive. The government's objective is a Tiger surrender. Rajapaksa claimed that to win, the government needed 25,000 more recruits, and said it can get them. The Tigers cannot match that, he noted.

Tigers Still Have Plenty of Ammo

14. (C) The Defense Secretary expressed appreciation for U.S. help in interdicting Tiger resupply efforts. However, he noted that his commanders report the Tigers still have ample ammunition and mortar rounds. A recent government capture included 150 mortar rounds from one position. Weapons caches are still being recovered daily in the Eastern Province,

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which indicates that the Tamil Tigers had built up tremendous stockpiles.

Boucher Presses for Humanitarian Access

15. (C) Assistant Secretary Boucher and Ambassador requested that the Defense Secretary take immediate steps to improve access for international and humanitarian organizations to displaced populations and other needy people near the fighting in the north. Ambassador placed particular importance on increased fuel allowances for the UN and non-governmental organizations in the Vanni so they can deliver relief supplies to the growing number of internally displaced persons. Rajapaksa stated that while the government controls access, it does not deny access. He denied reports that the government is restricting the flow of fuel and non-food items to international non-governmental organizations. (Note: UN and other humanitarian groups report that the government has only allowed them to bring a fraction of their fuel requirements for humanitarian operations into the Tiger-controlled Vanni. Ambassador has intervened at multiple levels to try to get an improvement in this situation.) Rajapaksa acknowledged one case in which some aluminum was stopped because of concern it could be used in the manufacture of bombs. He claimed that the Tamil Tigers were using vehicles from Norwegian Peoples Aid. The Ambassador pointed out that Norwegian organization reported immediately the theft of these vehicles by the Tigers.

Avoiding Civilian Casualties

16. (C) Boucher asked Rajapaksa to take all possible measures to try to protect vulnerable civilian populations fleeing the fighting in the Mannar area. Rajapaksa said that the advancing Sri Lankan military has found little evidence of damage -- and few remaining inhabitants. Most of the fighting has been in the jungle, with the army deliberately avoiding and encircling populated areas. The Tigers have been conducting some evacuations by sea, he noted. In a reversal of traditional preferences, he observed, the Tigers have moved from the jungles into population centers, and the government forces are operating in the jungles.

Promoting Stability in the East

17. (C) The Defense Secretary stated that development workers should have no security concerns in the Eastern Province. Both Muslim and Tamil people there have realized that they will benefit from greater security and the development that will follow. Tamil fears of forced resettlement elsewhere have been proven to be unfounded, he claimed. He said that in Trincomalee district, local leaders want Tamil displaced persons to return, but many do not want to. (Note: there are still several thousand families who have not been permitted to return to homes located in areas like Sampur declared high security zones by the government.) He suggested that tensions in the Eastern Province are now created more by Muslims than by Tamils.

New Tamil Political Force

18. (C) Rajapaksa claimed that 96% of Eastern Province Tamils support the TMVP. The TMVP is not a government creation, he said, but a Tamil political movement that enjoys greater support than parties which share the Tigers' political objectives (such as the Tamil National Alliance). He thought that the previous Government had made a mistake in not using them. The current Sri Lankan government, he said, has employed the TMVP as a tool, promoting the party among

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eastern Tamils. Local people say the TMVP politicians are more responsive than Sinhalese politicians, he observed. The government needs to keep TMVP leader Karuna (recently returned from the UK after serving several months for immigration fraud) involved, he said. The widely reported friction between Karuna and Pillayan is as normal as in any political party; political maneuvering is part of the process.

Disarming the Militias

19. (C) The Assistant Secretary and Ambassador pressed Rajapaksa on the question of demobilizing the paramilitaries' armed cadres. The Defense Secretary said he had spoken to the TMVP about this, which recognizes the problem. At present there is a mix of political and military cadres. The government is planning three options for demobilization, Rajapaksa said: 1) Some units could be merged into the military; vetting for this is ongoing. 2) Some could be taken into the police and Home Guards. 3) Some would be demobilized and given alternative vocational training. The process will take some time, however.

Child Soldiers

110. (C) Boucher pointedly asked Rajapaksa what the government was doing to apply pressure to the paramilitaries in the East to release their remaining child soldiers. The Defense Secretary claimed that the United Nations Children's Fund has sole responsibility in this area. Although the government has asked for details, such as names of the child soldiers, in order to pursue the issue, he said, the U.N. has refused to provide the information. The Defense Secretary reiterated that he had told Eastern Province Chief Minister "Pillaiyan" that the militias have to let all child soldiers go, and that the main paramilitary group has agreed to give the U.N. total access. Ambassador noted that the U.N. has recently provided names and locations of some child soldiers to the Secretary for the Ministry of Justice. He suggested the Defense Secretary speak to his colleague at the Ministry of Justice, Secretary Gmalath.

111. (C) COMMENT: The Defense Secretary was unyielding in holding out for a military victory as the only solution to

the ethnic conflict. He has consistently denied that there are serious problems with humanitarian access to the conflict-affected areas. We will continue to work with other donors, the UN and non-governmental organizations to resolve these problems. While demobilization of the armed paramilitaries will clearly take some time, we will continue to press for it as the key to bringing stability and sustainable development to the East. Our top priority remains obtaining the release of the child soldiers still serving with the armed groups. The cooperation between the U.N. and the government, particularly the Justice Ministry, has brought significant progress and some releases, but resistance by local militia commanders whose loyalties are more with Karuna than Pillaiyan is still a problem.

112. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher has cleared this cable.
BLAKE